

### [Take America to College, USA Today](#)

NEW HAVEN - A police officer, a single mother who waitresses 35 hours a week, an aspiring aviation mechanic, a sales assistant, and an Iraq war veteran. All have one thing in common: they are struggling to complete college. And there are millions like them. Policy makers want more college students to graduate; but fewer than half end up getting a degree. Students tell the truth about the steep challenges they face in the revealing documentary series, "Degrees of Difficulty."

The seven-part video series begins Monday, May 24th at [students2.usatoday.com](http://students2.usatoday.com). The videos will be available on USATODAY.com and on select sites in the Gannett Co., Inc. online network. Purple States TV produced the series in collaboration with DCTV and the Seattle-based social marketing firm Banyan Branch, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Three trailers for the series - "Fighting for a Degree," "Working for a Degree," and "Parents as Students" - are showing now at [students2.usatoday.com](http://students2.usatoday.com). The trailers feature the five students from the series, and include clips from auditions by other nontraditional students facing similar challenges. Video and audio clips are available to the media, and the students are available for interviews. An online chat with the featured students will take place at [USATODAY.com](http://USATODAY.com) on Wednesday, May 26th.

As the series shows, most college students do not fit the traditional image: going straight to college from high school, living in a dorm, and graduating with a four-year degree four years later. The 'nontraditional' student is the new normal. For 75% of today's students, the path through college is anything but a straight line.

The five students featured in the documentary series were chosen from almost 200 who responded to a casting call in February. Eager to be heard, they posted their personal stories online; 78 uploaded audition videos. An online vote selected one cast member. The other eight finalists were chosen by the producers, and were given a video camera to film their own back stories.

Five of the nine finalists were selected to make the trip to Washington, where they were filmed as they took their stories and concerns to policymakers. These five earned \$500 and are featured in the series: Dennis Medina, a Boston police officer and a student at Bunker Hill Community College; Brandon Krapf, an Iraq war veteran now at American University and in the US Army Reserves; Charneé Ball, a US Navy veteran at Valencia Community College in Orlando; Shane Burrows, who works full-time while attending Sierra Community College in California and Kathryn McCormick, a single parent, also enrolled at Valencia Community College.

These nontraditional students were absorbed in juggling responsibilities 24/7 when they heard about the opportunity to share their stories. As the five powerful portraits reveal, each student faces seemingly insurmountable barriers to getting a degree:

\* Dennis: "Going to college is almost impossible.... I wear plain clothes with the Boston Police Department Youth Violence Strike Force I have court during the day, then I have my regular shift which is 4 pm to midnight."

\* Shane: "I work full time and quit my second job so I could have time for school. I can barely afford to live, let alone pay for classes and books. With rising tuition costs and (California) budget cuts cutting classes, I feel like I'll never finish."

\* Charneé: "I served my country. And I'm not eligible (for G.I. bill benefits) because of my discharge characterization (under Don't Ask Don't Tell). So it's really hard to realize my dream of becoming an aviation mechanic. Right now I'm about \$34,000 in debt from student loans. I struggle every day to find the money to make ends meet."

\* Brandon: "I'm glad the new GI bill is helping veterans graduate with less debt but lots of older veterans are up to their eyeballs in college loans. Going to school's probably put me in debt a good \$100k. It gets down to the point where you're eating Ramen noodles every day."

\* Kathryn: "Going to college to become a physician's assistant is next to impossible because I have to split my time between school, family and work. I'm a waitress and I work 25-30hrs a

week on top of taking 16 credit hours this semester...that puts my workload at about 60hrs a week on top of looking after my 2 girls."

In their self-filmed stories, the students reveal how they manage to (in Dennis' words) "juggle and struggle" to keep their dreams alive. Telling their stories in person to a Washington policymaker - and to each other! - gives each of the students a glimpse of what the future may hold, for themselves and students like them.

\* Dennis and Kathryn both speak with Congressman Rubèn Hinojosa, Chair of the Higher Education Subcommittee of the House Education and Labor Committee. One comes away feeling hopeful, the other frustrated.

\* Charneé takes her quest for GI Bill benefits to the Servicemembers Legal Defense Fund and to Congressman Vic Snyder, of the House Veterans Affairs and Armed Services Committees.

\* Brandon explains to the architect of the new GI Bill, Congressman Harry Mitchell, that despite his best efforts, many veterans are being left behind.

Leaders of both parties say they are committed to increasing the number of US college graduates. As the Obama administration begins to implement direct student lending and other college support legislation that passed with health care reform, "Degrees of Difficulty" brings to life the real-world struggles and hopes of nontraditional students, and asks: "does it have to be so hard?"